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DESCRIPTION OF DAL'STROY GOLD MINES BY A RELEASED SLAVE LABORER

Der Spiegel, Vol VII, No 41
Hamburg, 7 Oct 1953

[The author of the following article, Hans Hoeffner of Stein near Nuremberg, was captured by the Soviet Army near Radom, Poland, in January 1945. He returned to his home town from Soviet captivity on 2 October 1953.]

It was at the beginning of November. Four weeks earlier, the military judge in Moscow had sentenced me for stealing potatoes. The sentence was based on a simple calculation: One year of forced labor for every kilogram of potatoes. Since I had stolen 7 kilograms of potatoes, I therefore received a 7-year sentence.... I went in a transport of 1,200 men, one of the very few Germans among them, by freight car via Moscow, Kazan', Omsk, across the Amur River to Nakhodka.... There we were loaded on the Kym, a coastal steamer of 7,000 tons.... The ship held about 3,000 criminal prisoners, only three Germans among all of them. Most of the convicts were Russians, sentenced for murder, robbery, etc. None had a sentence of less than 15 years....

After a 7-day trip we reached Magadan, in the Tuyskaya Bay. Magadan used to be a miserable fishing village, but now it has about 40,000 inhabitants. Reportedly, it was built after the war in American style by Japanese prisoners of war.... Magadan is the capital of the so-called "Gold Republic," an area about six times the size of the Federal Republic of Germany. Twenty years ago it has less than 10,000 inhabitants; today the number of people living between the Bering Strait and the Kolyma River is probably about 5 million. The peculiarity is the fact that most of the population consists of convicts. The MVD is in control of practically the entire region, which is also known as "Dal'stroy." The population is constantly increased by shipments coming in through Magadan. Four or five ships like the Kym make the trip between Vladivostok and Magadan 12 to 15 times each year. Assuming a load of 3,000 men for each trip, that means about 200,000 slave laborers every year. Every ship also carries large quantities of "Ammon-Gelit" [ammonia gelatin?], an explosive used in the Dal'stroy mines. Reportedly, ships have occasionally been blown up by careless handling of the explosive.

I was told that about 100 gold fields or shafts are being exploited in Dal'stroy. A torpedo boat with gold leaves Magadan for Vladivostok once a week.

In the spring, I went north from Magadan with a transport of convicts. The transport also carried cranes and tools for the mines.... The roads were just barely passable. Work brigades were stationed in log huts every 100 kilometers. They were charged with the maintenance of a certain sector of the road. During the winter, the roads are icy or blocked by snow, and during that season, the

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frozen rivers carry the road vehicles. An attempt was once made to send a convict transport through the Bering Strait and to land the convicts at Ambarchik on the Arctic coast. The ship, however, got stuck in the ice, and did not reach its destination until the summer of the following year. There was not a single convict left on board when it made port.... After 10 days we reached a little town on a river. The town, of about 5,000 inhabitants, is more than 1,000 kilometers from Magadan. It is built entirely of wood, and is located within the Arctic circle, in the center of the gold region. Airplanes fly the gold from there to Magadan.

I spent 2 years there. I worked both underground and on the surface, digging for gold. Surface mining is especially hard work, because the ground is rocky and frequently frozen. Surface mining is primitive and is done as follows:

An area 500 meters long by 200 meters wide, usually in a valley, is marked off. On the basis of scientific measurements, the depth at which gold will probably be struck is determined. On each field, there are usually 20 brigades of 30 men each. Each convict is assigned a "shurfa," a rectangle 1.20 meters by 80 centimeters. This is his work site. He has the following tools: a crowbar with pointed ends, a short-handled pickax, a short-handled shovel, and a spoon. First the earth is scraped off. Then the convict must make a hole in the ground with his crowbar. It must be in the upper left-hand corner of the rectangle and must be 50 centimeters deep and 10 centimeters in diameter. As the ground is rocky, the hole must literally be knocked into the ground. After this hole has been made, a second, identical hole is made in the diagonally opposite corner of the rectangle. The rock dust created by beating the crowbar against the ground is scraped out with the spoon. Work generally starts at 0800 hours, and by noon two holes must have been completed. Otherwise, the brigade leader administers a beating.

A 2-kilogram package of explosive is then inserted in each hole. Each package has a fuze. The blaster and his assistants, carrying burning fuzes, run from hole to hole, lighting the fuzes on the packages. By the time they have reached the last rectangle, the first charges are already exploding. In this manner, blasting is carried out until the desired depth has been reached. Then a 300-kilogram sack of explosive is placed in each rectangle, and the whole field is blasted electrically. The blast is like an earthquake. After the blasting, the earth is piled up in dumps by mechanical shovels. In the spring, the mountain streams are diverted through these opened gold fields.

Now the gold washers start their work. They are so-called "bezkonvoyniki," trusties, who need no guards. They are equipped with large wooden pans. The pans have a notch in the center, about half a centimeter deep. The gold washer rinses and slakes the earth in this pan, until the gold has collected in the notch. The norm per man per day is 12 to 15 grams of pure gold.

The "bezkonvoyniki" are the capitalists of Dal'stroy. They get the best food, and often bring gold from the fields, concealed in their quilted coats. However, gold has little value in Dal'stroy. One gram of gold is worth only 2 rubles, and a kilogram of bread costs 3.50 rubles. Smuggling gold out of Dal'stroy is practically impossible. The only possibility is to sell it to the so-called "exiles." They are former convicts who have not yet regained their civil rights. Until they are Soviet citizens with full rights again, they must remain in the exile region. Usually they are specialists, such as blasters, drivers, or shovel operators, but they are kept under surveillance....

I have seen gold nuggets weighing up to 500 grams found, usually in underground mining. In such cases, the supervisors are very generous to the finder, and, in addition, his 15-year sentence is reduced to 10 years.

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While surface mining in Dal'stroy is primitive, the underground mining is done by modern methods. The shafts go down as far as 25 meters, and galleries are often hundreds of meters long. Drilling is done with pneumatic tools. The rock dust is conveyed to the surface mechanically and piled up. The gold is extracted with modern mechanical equipment imported from the US....

In winter, the temperature goes down to as low as 60 degrees below zero [centigrade].... At that time, the Dal'stroy region is frequently cut off completely from the outside. Food is brought in only by air, if at all. One winter I spent there, our daily ration consisted of 200 grams of bread and a bowl of flour soup per day. We did not even get the customary kasha. As the food contained no vitamins, scurvy broke out, although we had to take a spoonful of antiscorvy medicine every morning. Winter clothing was inadequate. We had been issued felt boots at Magadan, but they were soon tattered, and we tied rags around our feet to keep warm. In severe cold, half an hour was enough to cause frostbite. During the most severe winters in Dal'stroy, up to 50 percent of the convicts died, according to my own estimate. Some convicts would mutilate themselves, but if this was proved, their sentence was doubled. Others fled, but they returned voluntarily, because they would have starved in the taiga otherwise. Still others hoped to be able to cross the Bering Strait to Alaska, but it is patrolled by Soviet warships and aircraft.

The Soviet soldiers who guarded us were themselves convicts, so to speak. They had been captured by the Germans and were assigned to Dal'stroy as punishment. The Soviet officers and officials who have agreed to serve in this hell are rotated every 3 years....

When I had become accustomed to my work, I tried to shorten my sentence by working above my norm. For 150-percent fulfillment, the sentence was shortened by one day, for 200 percent by 2 days, for fulfillment above 200 percent by 3 days. By the time my amnesty came through I had cut down my sentence by 8 months.

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